

Peer Reviewers

Eligibility and Responsibilities of Peer Reviewers

Peer reviewers are individual scientists and technical experts who possess relevant and extensive knowledge and experience in a field of science and can use that expertise to critically evaluate specific scientific research project plans for scientific and technical quality. Peer reviewers may be ARS or non-ARS scientists who are independent of the research being planned or performed and qualified to serve as an expert reviewer for a particular field of science or technical specialty. Generally, to be considered an expert in a field of science, a peer reviewer must be accomplished in his/her field and be nationally and/or internationally recognized as an authority in the field. Peer reviewers may be members of an academic institution, as well as Agency customers or stakeholders, provided they meet the above criteria. Peer reviewers serve as members of organized panels or as ad hoc peer reviewers.

Peer reviewers lend their expertise and experience to ARS in assessing the scientific and technical quality of research project plan approaches, methods, procedures, and use of material resources. Peer reviewers, unencumbered by internal or organizational viewpoints and associations to the research itself, are in a unique position to provide constructive feedback to ARS scientists. This feedback serves to improve the quality of ARS research by suggesting better alternatives and approaches or even stimulating creativity and new ideas about the science or methods employed. Peer reviewers serve as individual advisors to ARS. While their recommendations are not binding upon the Agency, their insights and suggestions are carefully considered to ensure the quality and credibility of the Agency's overall scientific program.

Peer reviewers are responsible for providing credible, objective, and thorough reviews of ARS research project plans according to the objectives and quality criteria set forth by the ARS. (See Appendix C1: Sample Peer Review Form.) Peer reviewers are also required to sign and honor confidentiality agreements to protect potentially sensitive information included in ARS research project plans. Peer reviewers are anonymous to the researchers responsible for each project plan and are expected to retain their anonymity as a peer reviewer in their discussions with anyone outside the OSQR.

All individuals who serve as a panel peer reviewer for ARS are reimbursed for their travel and lodging expenses according to government travel regulations and procedures. Non-federal panel chairs are paid the current hourly salary equivalent to a GS-15-01 federal salary. Non-U.S. government panel reviewers are also paid a stipend.

Panel Disciplines and Membership

Panel Chairs

A panel chair is a non-ARS scientist, designated by the Scientific Quality Review Officer to select the membership of, lead, and administer a convened peer review panel. Although panel chairs are also experts in the issues dealt with in the project plans, they do not participate in peer reviews. Panel chairs assign primary and secondary reviewers to each project and determine if ad hoc reviews are needed to supplement the expertise of the panel. (See Glossary for a definition of primary reviewer and secondary reviewer.) Panel chairs are responsible for ensuring review quality, enforcing review standards and procedures, moderating panel discussions, and collecting panel materials at the conclusion of a panel review for submission to the OSQR. When the peer review is completed, the panel chair submits a statement discussing the quality of the peer review session to the SQR Officer. (See Exhibit 5: Contents of the Panel Chair's Statement.)

Panel Selection

Panelists are selected according to the scientific disciplines necessary for a thorough and expert peer review of ARS's research project plans. Panelists are retained about six months prior to their review period and meeting to allow ample time to fill each primary and secondary reviewer slot. The majority of panel peer reviewers must be external (non-ARS) scientists. Panels are designed to provide balanced representation of a variety of backgrounds and perspectives on scientific issues relevant to the research activities represented in their assigned project plans. Attention is given to diversity parameters including gender, race, ethnic background, and disabilities, as well as seeking representatives from private sector and non-land grant colleges, universities, and research institutions/centers.

The OSQR facilitates the panel chair's peer reviewer selection process. Internal and external scientists, ARS management, and stakeholders may suggest reviewers to the Scientific Quality Review Officer but are not directly involved in the panelist selection. (See section on "Anonymity of Reviewers" below.) The SQR Officer is responsible for ensuring as much diversity in peer panels as possible (e.g., institutional, underrepresented groups, and geographic base.) while maintaining the best available expertise.

Conflict of Interest Guidelines

A peer reviewer is considered to hold a real or potential conflict of interest if he/she possesses an institutional affiliation with the research project laboratory, investigators, or collaborators or would gain some benefit from the project, financial or otherwise. Furthermore, a conflict of interest exists if the peer reviewer has had any of the following relationships with the lead scientist or other member of the research team in the past four years:

- Collaboration on research projects
- Co-authorship
- Thesis or post-doctoral advisorship
- Work as a graduate student or postdoctoral associate

Peer reviewers with a conflict of interest with regard to a particular plan will excuse themselves from all considerations of that plan. External scientists serving as a peer

reviewer for a research project are not precluded from subsequently entering into agreements or collaboration with any ARS research unit or scientist.

Confidentiality of Information

ARS research project plans may include information about the underlying research and existing or anticipated research results that is considered by ARS to be proprietary or confidential. Reviewers may not copy, quote, discuss, or otherwise use material from this proposal outside the panel review process. Reviewers must leave all project plans and review materials in the possession of ARS at the conclusion of a panel meeting and erase such materials from their computers, disks, or other electronic storage techniques.

Anonymity of Reviewers

To foster reviewer openness and objectivity, ARS does not disclose the membership of a peer review panel to its scientists or staff. Panel chairs are not anonymous but are required to honor this policy as well and may not discuss review assignments other than with the OSQR. Once a panel is convened, subject members of the National Program Team will be present to provide an overview of the Program and will therefore know the identity of the panelists. The National Program Team is prohibited from disclosing panel membership to other ARS staff as well.

Should any reviewer be contacted by an ARS scientist or member of the National Program Staff concerning the review, the reviewer must not discuss the matter and is requested to contact the OSQR to handle the situation. OSQR may be reached at (301) 504-3282.

**Comments
for Section 9
Peer Reviewers**